

Sex, texts and money, funding and Latin American queer cinema: the cases of Martel's *La niña santa* and Puenzo's *XXY*

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Abstract

Through a focus on *La niña santa/The Holy Girl* by Lucrecia Martel (2004) and *XXY* by Lucía Puenzo (2007), this article aims to examine the relationship between texts, sex and money. It considers theoretical approaches to European funding programmes and world cinema, and argues that a number of European production companies have created spaces for queer cinema which has proven beneficial to a range of Latin American films and has coincided with a boom in films directed by women. The article focuses on two new powerful protagonists, Amalia, Martel's holy girl and Puenzo's Alex, an intersex teenager, who both bring new gazes and new forms of representation to global screens. My concern in the study are the ways in which certain film languages can be used to address an implied international art cinema spectator to make queerness part of our filmic conversation with texts, and the ways in which these languages engage with new modernities emerging through the reconfigurations of new queer families.

This article takes as its point of departure a new phenomenon: the emergence of a group of important films directed by Latin American women that have been made with a view to the international market. In the last ten years a series of such films have circulated globally, albeit within channels reserved for art cinema, thanks to co-productions with European funding streams. These include *La ciénaga/The Swamp* (2001) *La niña santa/The Holy Girl* (2004) *La mujer sin cabeza/The Headless Woman* (2008) by Lucrecia Martel; *Perfume de violetas: nadie te oye/Violet perfume: No One is Listening* by Marisa Sistach, (2001), *XXY* (2007), and *El niño pez/The Fish Child* (2009) by Lucía Puenzo; *Madeinusa* (2006) and *La teta asustada/The Milk of Sorrow* (2009) by Claudia Llosa, and *El último verano de la boyita Last Summer of La Boyita* by Julia Solomonoff (2009).²

The analysis here focuses on two recent films by Argentine directors, *La niña santa* written and directed by Lucrecia Martel (2004), and *XXY* written and directed by Lucía Puenzo (2007), and based on a short story, 'Cinismo', written by Puenzo's

partner Sergio Bizzio. These films provide examples of co-productions with social and private sources of funding, and have created an impact thanks to positive critical reception, and their queer protagonists. This study aims to examine the complex forms of co-production and establish a link between these and the film texts with a particular emphasis on representations of new protagonists and queer cinema. I argue that an analysis of the relationship between representations of gender and sexuality and the funding mechanisms of each film helps to explain the place of these films in the international art cinema market. In the first part of the chapter I examine these funding mechanisms focusing on *La niña santa* and *XXY*. In the following section, I elaborate two approaches that I consider the most fruitful in establishing a connection between the film texts and their funding mechanisms: the relationship between representations of the local and the intimate in this transnational cinema, and, what will be the main focus of this work, the new queer female and intersex protagonist on the international stage.

It is true that there have been female Latin American directors that have made films with a certain transnational reach before this generation of filmmakers. These include the Brazilian director Suzana Amaral, Solveig Hoogesteijn, the Venezuelan filmmaker of Dutch and German parentage, and the Mexican Guita Schyfter among others.³ The best known of these are the Argentine María Luisa Bemberg who directed six feature films between 1981 and 1993 and the Mexican María Novaro who has also directed six films feature films.⁴ However, I contend that Martel, Llosa, and Puenzo's arrival onto the international stage at the beginning of 21st century marked the beginning of an extraordinary moment in the history of Latin American cinema. This moment can be characterized by two related elements: the increasing number of women making films acclaimed by critics; and the opportunities presented for co-financing arrangements between Europe and Latin America.

Funding arrangements for *XXY* and *La niña santa*, and *XXY* and some theoretical musings

La niña santa, and *XXY* are co-productions that have benefitted from European government funds and from organisations aligned with festivals which also receive government funding. They have also been supported by private money from commercial producers as will be seen in more detail. Each of Lucrecia Martel's films has sought external funding thanks to the support and experience of her producer Lita Stantic (also the producer of María Luisa Bemberg's films and those of a number of talented Argentine directors).⁵ Thanks to Stantic the screenplay for *La ciénaga* was entered in and won the Sundance Institute/NHK Award in 1999 (Forcinito 2006: 112). The prize was a paltry \$10,000, but what is most important is the status that such an award affords a film, and the resulting possibilities of attracting further international funding. These possibilities were realized by the fact that the completed film was an Argentine, French, and Spanish co-production.⁶

From the moment of its conception *La niña santa* also looked abroad for funding and it found it from a range of sources. Martel won a grant from Cinéfondation, a programme aligned with the Cannes film festival, to attend the Résidence that aims to allow filmmakers to complete their screenplays in supportive surroundings.⁷ According to the Cannes Festival website 'the Résidence du Festival welcomes every year a dozen young directors who work there on their first or second fictional feature film project' (The Residence).⁸ It adds, 'it makes available to them a place of

residence in the heart of Paris, a personalised programme accompanying the writing of their scripts, and a collective programme of forums with film industry professionals'. In this way, French cultural institutions are seeking to place themselves at the heart of world art cinema. The Spanish Almodóvar brothers' production company El Deseo that supports auteurist projects co-produced *La niña santa*, along with Martel's next film *La mujer sin cabeza*. The film also secured a grant from the Festival of Rotterdam's Hubert Bals Fund to complete the work, as well as money from Italian companies.⁹ *La niña santa* is the result, then, of a complex configuration of private and public finance, and is an example of auteurist Latin America cinema made possible thanks to the support of European organizations and companies.

As with *La niña santa*, Lucía Puenzo's *XXY* followed this model of public and private, social and commercial finance, and her first film was made possible also thanks to a grant from Cinéfondation, and a period on the Résidence programme (Goldbarg 2008). According to Puenzo, Cinéfondation completely changed the identity and direction of her film:

The support from Cine Fondation, the Residence at Cannes Film Festival made the whole thing to take another turn [sic]. After that some co-producers came in, and it became a more serious film. I had planned to shoot it with a few friends in Uruguay with a camera I had at home[. . .] After the support from Cinéfondation, other major co-producers like Fond [sic] Sud came to the project and *XXY* was turned around. It wouldn't have been the same film without that support. The same happens with the support of other film funds like the Hubert Bals from Rotterdam Film Festival: they change the destiny of a film (Goldbarg 2008).

This initial support, then, resulted in a Spanish and French coproduction financed by private companies and state funds. The private companies are Wanda Visión (Spain), Pyramide Film (France) and the Argentine Historias Cinematográficas Cinemanía, owned by Luis Puenzo, well-known director and father of Lucía.¹⁰ Other sources of finance come from the Spanish Ministry of Culture, and Fonds Sud which was funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of culture and the Centre National de la Cinématographie (French Film Institute) (Falicov 2010: 9).¹¹ *XXY* had its premiere at the Cannes Film Festival in May 2007 where it won the critics' week Grand Prize. It is worth noting that *XXY* also had critical success in Argentina, and won 6 awards at the Argentine film Academy (Academia de cine de Argentina) ('*XXY* La gran ganadora, 2007'), and was selected to represent Argentina at the 2007 Oscars. This chain of events shows the importance that social support can have for Latin American directors and for filmmakers from many other countries without access to large budgets.

In 'The film festival as producer: Latin American films and Rotterdam's Hubert Bals fund', Miriam Ross gives a summary of theoretical debates relating to the relationship between 'third world' cinema and world cinema funding bodies. Ross explains (2011: 262) that critics have spoken of a wish to see 'poverty porn' (Shackleton 2010), and a neo-colonialist tendency within film organizations (Peranson, 2008). Ross (264) puts forward the idea that the films supported by programmes such as the Hubert Bals Fund depend on images of poverty, crime and violence and processes of

underdevelopment, giving as examples *Días de Santiago* (Méndez, 2004) and *Pizza Birra Faso* (Caetano, 1998). As Ross argues, this emphasis on third world signifiers characterises some films coproduced by these world cinema funds. Likewise, Randall Halle develops an argument that European funding bodies have generated a new cycle of Orientalism, and critiques what he sees as a deception in the fact that the films funded are frequently presented and consumed as national cultural artefacts, with the production details obscured from the viewers. Halle notes, 'Under the guise of authentic images, the films establish a textual screen that prevents apprehension of the complexly lived reality of people in not-too-distant parts of the world' (2010: 314). While Halle makes many interesting observations that merit close thought, there is an essentialist premise behind his analysis that more authentic images are presented when the funding of a film relies on purely national sources

He is clearly right to argue that, 'the coproduced films must offer stories that appeal to European and North American audiences' (317); nonetheless his notion of neo-colonialism does not hold up to scrutiny in all cases and not in the specific cases discussed here. Halle (214) claims: "because the intervention [the funding] takes place through a masquerade of national appearance, it marks a gentler form of neocolonial activity in the transnational era'. I would contend that such generalisations do not withstand interrogation in all contexts, and while as seen, both Puenzo and Martel's films were transformed due to the European funding they received, they do not conform to a European vision of Latin American fictional world. They are not 'cultural texts that speak the truth of the other on behalf of that other' (314). Rather, they speak their own subjective truths which also speak to European and other non-Argentine audiences. In addition, while it is true that films directed by Latin Americans and (co)-financed by European funds and companies are often marketed and consumed as national texts, the funding details are not hidden; they are visible in the credits and are openly discussed by the directors in interviews. It can be argued that the authorial visions of the directors have been more fully realized by the additional funding released by the European funding bodies, and that these link to social changes taking place in Argentina that have coincided with social changes taking place in Europe. This can be better theorized by a notion of mutual benefit over neo-colonial exploitation.¹² Perhaps what is revealed by this discussion is that so many films from so many parts of the world (Latin America, Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe) are co-financed by European funding programmes that no one theoretical model can be applied to this dynamic.

Local, Intimate and Transnational Cinema

Notwithstanding the above stance, it is certainly the case that European funding mechanisms further problematize already shaky conceptualisations of national cinema. Films such as *La niña santa*, *La mujer sin cabeza*, *XXY*, *El niño pez/ Madeinusa* and *La teta asustada* demonstrate that many films, that are often considered national cinema texts, only exist thanks to complex transnational financial arrangements, and it cannot escape notice that *La niña santa* and *XXY*, two intensely local films by Argentine filmmakers, were both written in Paris as part of the Résidence programme described above. In fact, it can be said that these two case studies dispense with obvious signs of the national in a relationship created between the intimate, the local and the global, and thus seek a form of subjective universalism. The two films that I discuss here are based on narratives rooted in interior, personal and local contexts, but they are directed to an international art cinema audience

(which includes a national audience). There is a close relationship between local/intimate/subjective spaces and transnational production and exhibition, which points to the foreign audiences' desires to look inside the homes and hearts of the Latin American protagonists.

To give some specific examples, *La niña santa* takes place almost exclusively in the closed space of a hotel in Salta (in the hometown of Martel in Argentina). Martel recreates the story from the space of autobiographical memory, and managed to shoot the film in the exact place, the Hotel Termas in Salta, where she stayed as a girl with her family. As she explains in an interview:

When I started writing the history, I situated it there it there for the evocative sensuality and mystery. For a moment I thought I would have to film in a less authentic hotel [...], but in Salta there was no hotel like that. And I had a completely irrational and absurd desperation to film in Salta. So I went to Termas to see if it were possible. I spent two days there, alone as a dog, and I knew that that had to be the place (Enríquez, 2004).¹³

Thus, there is a symbiosis between the hotel and the characters, in particular Amalia and her mother Helena. In this way, in *La niña santa* intimate spaces are selected over national spaces and these travel directly to an international audience. As Debbie Martin notes, the film rejects an allegorical path taken by many Latin American films with child protagonists: 'This is a film which [. . .] refuses to represent, a radical move in a cinematic landscape where the use of the child often signals (national) allegory' (Martin 2011: 69).¹⁴

XXY is the story of an Argentine family that has gone into self-imposed exile on a remote island in Uruguay, to escape the prejudices that they have experienced in the city of Buenos Aires. Alex (Inés Efrón) was born intersex; s/he is 15 years old and *XXY* explores her search for identity and the film can be located within progressive discourses that promote LGBT interests and rights for intersex people.¹⁵ As Christine Gleghorn (2011: 154) rightly notes, the film 'overlaps with concerns of activist groups' in the way that it critiques automatic 'corrective' surgery and hormone treatments. There are no specific geographic markers that locate *XXY* in Uruguay and the narrative could unfold in any similar seaside village in the world. In this sense it can be compared to *La niña santa*. The film's locations are as metaphorical as they are real and they connect the intimate with the global; that is, nature is harnessed to illustrate themes such as sexual desire, the desire for freedom, solitude, and human diversity.

Margaret Frölich in a fascinating study, has argued that nature is what determines the identity of Alex: 'Rather than arguing in favour of any choice that the adolescent characters might make in regard to their bodies and sexualities, *XXY* ultimately prioritizes nature over agency; the right choice is the natural choice' (Frölich 2012: 161). An alternative reading provided here is that the wild, and free landscape of the beach, forest and the sea are symbolic spaces, as is the hotel of *La niña santa*, and these spaces give voice to Alex's emotional world as an intersex teenager who does not want to limit herself to a single gender identity. As we will see, Alex is a queer character, but Puenzo's achievement is to place her queerness within a landscape which is both natural, metaphorical and poetic. In this, there is an implicit criticism of

discourses of the Christian right that situate non-heteronormativity in the realms of the unnatural.

New Queer Protagonists

Clearly some films that are co-produced with European funds offer images rooted in stereotypical notions of a violent and socially marginal Latin America, as Miriam Ross has argued (2011), and European funding of films from 'developing' economies leads to the notion of a renewal of neo-colonial power relations as seen (Halle 2010). Nonetheless, I am proposing here that European funding streams have helped create a new category of transnational global art films with new queer protagonists with diverse sexual identities and defiant disturbing gazes. A number of the films listed above can be placed within this category of Latin American European co-productions: *Perfume de violetas: nadie te oye*, *La niña santa*, *XXY*, *El niño pez*, *Madeinusa*, *La teta asustada*, *El último verano de la boyita* and *Tan de repente* (Lerman, 2002). It would be essentialist to claim that these spaces are only reserved for women directors, and *Tan de repente* is directed by Diego Lerman (but produced by Lita Stantic), however, as the other films demonstrate, the high profile of young women directors on a global arts cinema stage has clearly been facilitated by the funding bodies

The characters of these films occupy spaces characterized by desire; they demand attention, and they are unlike many other female characters on the global stage (although it should be acknowledged that *Madeinusa* also corresponds to the model of poverty tourism to which Ross refers). Rosalind Galt argues that this phenomenon is not exclusive to Latin America, but characterizes much global film in what she calls 'world cinema's queer turn' (2013): "From Tsai Ming-liang in Taiwan to Lucrecia Martel in Argentina, contemporary global art cinema is characterized by a recurrent queer sensibility" (Galt 2013).

La niña santa

Martel's queer sensibility is not found in obvious representations of gay, lesbian or bisexual love, but in the way she creates a text with multiple sites of desire that escape scientific and social regulation - represented by the Congress of physicians that takes place in the hotel - and religious regulation - represented by the Catholic youth group that Amalia and her friend Jose(fina) attend. These perverse desires are embodied in the main characters: in Dr. Jano who likes to press himself against young, anonymous women, and in the protagonist Amalia who believes herself to be in love with Jano after experiencing his 'perversion' as an epiphany and who pursues him for the rest of the diegesis, hoping to save him with her love. They also take root in Helena, who hopes to establish a romantic relationship with Jano, despite knowing that he is married and has children. The film presents the new queer family unit with the hotel standing in for the home. Amalia has an absent father who has formed a new family with his second wife, and she harbours Oedipal desires for Dr Jano, while Helena and her brother's relationship is closer to husband and wife as they share a living space and their (non-sexual) intimacy. Martel's sensibility also manifests itself in her narrative strategies, as we will see.

The images that remain in the minds of viewers and that are used to sell the film in promotional materials depend on the gaze of the protagonist. In *La niña santa* Amalia has a powerful new voyeuristic, and sensual gaze. Amalia's gaze exists in opposition to that theorized by Claire Johnston (1973); the patriarchal gaze which objectifies woman and converts her into a 'sign' created from male fantasies. Neither is she a woman without a look of her own, who is reduced to being the object of the male gaze as theorised by Laura Mulvey (1975). In fact, the film can be seen as a challenge in the form of a filmic essay to traditional cinematic relations between men who look and women as objects of the male gaze, which have inspired so much feminist theory.¹⁶ This reversal of the traditional male gaze has been the focus of the majority of readings of the film (Forcinito, 2006, Martin, 2011, Arboleda, 2011). What I aim to do here is to build on these readings by considering the way the film's analysis of relations of looking fits within concerns of global arts cinema.

Amalia (and Martel) possess a new gaze which threatens the male character, Dr. Jano, but, at the same time it is a private gaze rooted in the realms of the sexual and the spiritual. This gaze is the central theme of the film and it is fixed on a man who, in traditional films, would represent a threat for the girl who is object of his sexual predilections. As in the case with art cinema queer texts, *La niña santa* questions conventional moral systems, in this case both patriarchal and feminist. The manifestation of Dr Jano's desire is represented as part of the panorama of human sexuality. He is not a sexual predator, according to the moral universe of the film, although a man with his sexual proclivities would be considered a dangerous pervert in the popular media and for feminists. By the same token, Amalia is not represented as his victim even though he is a professional man who is many years her senior. Amalia's desire to save him in a Catholic sense is mixed with her sexual desires and these confused feelings result in him becoming a victim of her obsession.

He is not the 'bearer of the look' to use Mulvey's terminology in her analysis of Hollywood models, rather 'he cannot bear to look', and this is how his predilection of pressing against anonymous women can be explained. The film presents him as a weak being who fears intimacy, not a dangerous being, and in this way, *La niña santa* reconfigures decades of cinematic depictions of male and female gazes.

According to the director/writer:

He is not a monster... to lean sexually against someone is not a rape; it is something so close to a child's sexual experience that was vital to try to ensure that was not lost in the character. Jano is a kind of gigantic child who can't handle everything (Enríquez 2004).¹⁷

Jano is the manifestation of an adolescent fantasy, and it is through this fantasy that Amalia's queerness takes form, not only in the teenage kisses she shares with her friend Josefina. It can be said that Amalia has invented her own version of Dr. Jano and she needs his 'sexual perversion' to give shape to her erotic and spiritual/religious desires; desires that have the heretical and paradoxical goal of saving him through a sexual love. In fact, she is the one who pursues him, and in a memorable scene, she places herself in front of Jano, when he is looking for an anonymous woman to press himself against. Amalia turns her head to look at him directly and Jano flees as if pursued by a stalker - with the act of looking interpreted by him as an act of

aggression (see figure 1).

The look is also transnational in the sense that, although it comes from a very intimate space, from the secret desires of Amalia, it connects with a global audience. *La niña santa* belongs to a tradition of national art cinema that inscribes an examination of the processes of filmmaking within the diegesis itself. As Jens Andermann explains, *La niña santa* is an example of filmmaking that incorporates ‘showing and seeing as key dimensions of the image itself’ (2012:155). For Andermann, this is a characteristic of Argentine cinema ‘Argentine cinema in the wake and aftermath of the millennium has been a form of historical consciousness by making the image conscious of itself’ (156). Although, as Andermann demonstrates, this is an important factor in the history of Argentine cinema, Martel’s success in the international arena depends on her use of an intellectual and self-conscious global language of art cinema that attracts cinephiles and has made Martel a critical success and a favourite of art house audiences.¹⁸

The focus on the look within the diegesis connects the film to a long tradition of internationally respected filmmakers who explore and analyse the function of the process of looking within cinema, and helps to place it within a canon of art film. Many of these auteurs’ films explore the relationship between sexuality, voyeurism and cinema. To give a selection of many possible examples: *Rear Window* (Hitchcock, 1954), *Peeping Tom* (Powell, 1960), *Blow-Up* (Antonioni, 1966), *The Draughtsman's Contract* (Greenaway, 1982), the early films of Atom Egoyan (*Family Viewing*, 1988, *The Adjuster* (1991), and *Exotica*, 1994), *Kika* (Almodóvar, 1993), *Tesis/Thesis* by Amenábar (1996), and *不散, Bu San/Goodbye Dragon Inn* (Tsai Ming-Liang, 2003).¹⁹

Both Rosalind Galt and Ruby Rich add a queer dimension to a reading of Martel’s films, conceptualising her as a queer filmmaker for her narrative approaches and refusal to produce meaning. Galt bases her ideas on those of Teresa de Lauretis (2011), and she argues that queer texts:

unsettle temporality, identity and relationality, positing hard-to-read possibilities and bonds that might or might not be read as queer. The affective register of world cinema opens up potentialities for queer cathexes that become transnational, reaching out in unpredictable directions.²⁰

Likewise, Rich locates Martel’s queerness in her use of open structures, the refusal to produce answers to narrative possibilities, and a preference for suggestion and implication over direction and foreclosure:

It’s a queer world all around, captivating and repellent in turn, a puzzle that challenges viewers to dare to play. She offers a wondrous example of how queer cinema, done right, is cause for a radical expansion of possibility. She parses queer questions, not queer answers... (2013: 180)

It is, she continues, ‘a cinema that’s queer, not a queer cinema; an assumptive not a declarative one’ (181)

Despite the lack of overt homosexual characters (with the exception perhaps of Momi [Sofía Bertolotto) in *La ciénaga*, and Candita [Inés Efrón] in *La mujer sin cabeza*), Martel's cinema is, then, an example of queer art film both in terms of its form and its character representation. Nonetheless, the assumptive style of Martel and its refusal to produce clearly legible meaning, paradoxically, makes it legible on the art cinema circuit, which expects such characteristics. This is noted by Paul Julian Smith who writes, "her projects, although resolutely oblique, have generally proved 'translatable' to world art house audiences" (2012:25).²¹ The film's originality is found in the way it opens up the possibilities of sexual identity through a queer, teenage, Catholic and provincial gaze, and in the way it situates the desires of Amalia and her 'victim', Dr. Jano, within the complex landscape of human sexuality.²²

The 'message' of the film also follows a queer paradigm in its rejection of Christian, patriarchal and feminist moral belief systems. Martel does not judge Jano as a 'deviant', neither does she judge the 'holy girl' who is possessed by sexual desire; what she criticizes implicitly is a religious and patriarchal society that tries to suppress and punish forms of sexuality outside of what is considered acceptable. This lack of judgement is also where Ruby Rich roots Martel's queerness, and she comments on the way a 'very queer vision emerged: gazing wide-eyed and unapologetically at absolutely everything and listening without judgment to all that was said.' (179). Martel is, then, the medium/storyteller who channels the multiple voices of her characters to present her very particular view of bourgeois, Argentine provincial society.

The subversion of traditional forms of morality (whether patriarchal, right-wing Catholic or even feminist) is what unites this new corpus of films by transnational Latin American women directors. It is also what creates spaces for them in the international art cinema market. The two best-known films directed by Argentine women have many aspects that distinguish them from each other; however, they have two important points in common. Both *XXY* and *La niña santa* aim to discredit medical discourses that stress controlling and regulating sexuality, and they do this through adolescent, defiant protagonists who are possessed by sexual desires and the wish to choose their own identity in opposition to dominant social ideas. In *La niña santa* this criticism is seen through the Congress of physicians (otorhinolaryngologists), and the implied destruction of Dr Jano's career for reasons of sexual impropriety. Martel suggests that the behaviour of Jano should not be harshly judged and conceives it as a childish act, an example perhaps of arrested development that does not deserve so much social opprobrium.

XXY: queer but not strange

As has been well documented and theorized, the medical profession, the traditional institution of the family, and the Church concern themselves with the regulation of desires (Foucault 1990). Martel and Puenzo's filmmaking presents the possibility of deregulating fantasy and the desires that constitute that fantasy, and shows how they cannot be contained within heteronormative frameworks. *XXY* tells the story of Alex, an intersex adolescent who has been brought up as a girl, but who has not been operated on. However, she is expected to take a daily diet of hormonal pills prescribed to prevent her masculinization. The film is what Puenzo calls a 'respectful fiction' (Goldbarg 2008), since in reality, as Mariano García (2007) notes, 'genital ambiguity has nothing to do with XXY genes, which correspond to what is clinically

called Klinefelter syndrome' (author's translation);²³ in fact, Alex's condition is congenital adrenal hyperplasia (García 2007).

However, *XXY* is not concerned with medical details, but uses the condition for its queer potential. As with *La niña santa*, the film is interested in expanding what is meant by an acceptable sexuality and gender identity. As in Martel's film the narrative turns on the sexual desires of the protagonist and the search for an identity, and, in the case of *XXY*, on Alex's decision to stop taking medication in a literal and symbolic decision to embody both sexes. *XXY* follows a more conventional filmic structure than *La niña santa*, since it is a text that fits within the category of popular art film: it follows a realistic model, has melodramatic structures, an emphasis on the emotional world of the characters, a clear thesis, and an easy to read meaning. Nonetheless, it fits well within Brett Farmer's notion of 'vernacular queerness' (2011), adopted from Miriam Hanson's notion of vernacular modernism, and described by Farmer as 'a range of idiomatic registers - whereby the multiple transformations of modernity can be processed in locally meaningful ways by different audiences (83).²⁴ According to Farmer who uses the term in the context of queer Thai cinema, vernacular queerness is 'a translation of the abstract discourses of sexual modernity into accessible and legible form' (85). That is, certain cinematic languages help audiences understand gay and transgender experiences, and *XXY* is a good example of this type of popular art film that focuses on creating empathy for marginalized characters.

Vernacular queer is, for Farmer, a broad term that encapsulates 'difficult' art cinema, but also popular national and transnational film. He mentions Thai films targeted at national market segments, but also includes transnational dynamic 'middle brow, art house inflected mainstream films (86) or the 'avant-grade, internal auteurist cinema of Apichatpong Weerasethakul (87) and he warns against 'overly hasty or reified conceptions of them as totally disjunctive paradigms' (87) as they 'share a cinematic investment in the operations of vernacular queerness'. Farmer uses the term specifically to apply to the way the film *Love of Siam* (Sakveerakul, 2007) can be read in a way to make sense of evolving Thai society by Thai audiences. My concern here are the ways in which certain film languages can be used to address an implied international art cinema spectator to make queerness part of our filmic conversation with texts, and the ways in which these languages engage with new modernities emerging through the reconfigurations of new queer families. Thus, according to this conceptualization both Martel's films and those of Puenzo (including *El niño pez*) can be seen as forming part of the vernacular queer as they present a range of sexual identities located in very specific local realities in ways that can be appreciated by local and global cinema audiences, albeit on different scales of the difficult/popular art film scale.²⁵

At the root of this, in the context of *XXY* is the way that a paradigmatic other who falls outside of gender and sexual binaries is incorporated into the world of the viewer and thus 'de-othered'. Christine Gleghorn makes some compelling points linking Alex with exotic otherness, referring to aquatic mythical beings, lizards and even aliens (through her blue colour at birth), using the concept of the monstrous feminine to read this otherness (2011:158- 165).²⁶ Nonetheless, I would place more emphasis on the ways that the film does all it can to de-monsterise Alex through its empathetic strategies. The queerness of *XXY* is, then, located in the character of Alex in a number

of ways, through the cultivation of an empathetic queer gaze; through the way she claims ownership over her desires; through her refusal to settle on a single, stable sexual gender; and for the way in which she is circulated through targeted film channels to international (and national) gay and lesbian audiences. Audiences see a fragile character who suffers and the film makes her experience legible for a cine-literate global audience.

This empathetic queer gaze is cultivated by having the audience take the points of view of three characters, that of Alex and that of two characters who have her at the centre of their emotional world: Álvaro (Martín Piroyansky), who is fascinated by Alex and falls in love with her after an act of passion and penetration through which he discovers that she is intersex; and her sympathetic but confused father who is unsure of what action to take to support his child. Nonetheless, he accepts her as part of the natural world aided by his understanding as a marine biologist of the variety of species he encounters. This gaze also rests on the refusal to view Alex as a freak or a monster, and therefore on the refusal to accommodate a voyeuristic or 'medical gaze' (Martin 2013: 35). As Debbie Martin notes, by not presenting the biological evidence of Alex's intersex status "the film constructs a spectator who is aware, an "insider" who is given information as if s/he already knows, thus avoiding a major revelation about Alex's body' (39). In this way, the spectator is 'incorporated into the queer community surrounding Alex', (39). Christine Gleghorn also makes effective parallels between a violent surgeon's gaze directed at Alex and 'the curious gaze elicited through the framework of voyeurism in film' (Gleghorn 2011:169). Yet, she sees this in terms of a withholding device which 'provides much of the tension in the film' (2011:164). I would dispute this reading as, as the reader is invited into Alex's queer world, no interest is gained by seeing her genitalia and it would have no impact on the diegesis. The few instances where viewers come close to seeing 'it' are, in fact, uncomfortable and do not offer any resolution. The first is when she is attacked in a near rape by some local boys whose aim is to see if she has a penis; and the second is when she insists on showing her penis to Álvaro as she misinterprets his feelings for her thinking he too just wants to see 'it'.

While the gaze encouraged by the film rests on empathy, Alex is not to be pitied: cinema has moved away from earlier representations of suffering victims and queer film likes its heroes and heroines to be feisty and controversial. Although Alex is subject to the prejudice and ignorance of her society, she refuses a passive stance and cultivates an attitude of defiance that disturbs many around her. This attitude has defined New Queer Cinema according to Ruby Rich's original formulation (1992), whereby she argued that queer films, (she was discussing films from the United States in the 1990s), have little in common in terms of aesthetics or approach to narrative, but the characters have the same sense of defiance and do not apologize for their sexuality; what Barbara Mennel defines, from Rich, as an 'unapologetic, 'in-your-face-attitude' (2012: 69)

Alex is a desiring, active subject, and in an interview Puenzo places emphasis on the importance of desire in the film:

One day an inter-sexual friend told me, and I agree, that the most interesting part in the film is not the freedom of choice or inter-sexuality in itself, but the

place that desire has in the story. The film is really about desire, and if you connect with desire you are saved (Goldbarg 2008).

This is illustrated in the way Alex introduces herself to Alvaro and the audience. The first thing she says is, “te hiciste la paja”, “you have had a wank”, not as a question but as a statement. Alvaro tries to change the subject, saying, “nunca había estado en Uruguay”, “I had never been in Uruguay”, but Alex insists on returning to the subject of sex. “Estamos hablando de la paja y salís con Uruguay. Nunca me acosté con nadie vos te acostarías?” “We are talking about having a wank, and you come out with Uruguay! I have never slept with anyone, would you?” He asks, “who with?” and Alex answers directly, “with me”.²⁷ Alex looks at Álvaro intensely while he tries to avoid her gaze. Alex thus makes an immediate impact on the viewers and succeeds in shocking and fascinating both viewers and Álvaro.

This scene can be read as an intertextual reference to another Argentine queer text, *Tan de repente/Suddenly* (Lerman, 2002), which also received part of its funding from the Hubert Bals fund.²⁸ When one of the protagonists, Mao, sees Marcia, another of the protagonists, for the first time, she asks her, “querés coger” “do you want to fuck”, followed by “te quiero tocar” “I want to touch you”, and later in the café, “te quiero chupar la concha” “I want to eat your pussy”, despite the fact that Marcia does nothing to encourage her and tells her she is mad. Mao can be seen as a sexual gangster, who instigates sex with those she desires regardless of the consequences, and although Puenzo gives a more melodramatic treatment to Alex, they are both from a family of queer characters in Argentine and global film cultures.²⁹

What the characters also share is a refusal to limit themselves to singular gender and sexual identities. Mao repeatedly insists that she is not a lesbian and wants to fuck the men and women whom she chooses. Alex does not want to choose between being male or female, a paradoxical decision-non-decision which is seen when she tells her father, “and what if there is nothing to choose?” She does not want to limit herself to a single sexual choice, and answers that she does not know when Álvaro asks whether she is attracted to men or women. As Gleghorn notes, Alex is ‘doubly unruly in the sense that she wishes neither to define her body as a stable entity, nor to behave according to heterosexual gender norms (2011:168). This position that does not ask for tolerance or forgiveness, and is unwilling to limit itself to established ideas of gender or sexuality, characterizes New Queer cinema with its emphasis on independent American film, but it also characterizes global queer art cinema (as Pedro Almodóvar, among many others, has illustrated so well throughout his career).

This is reflected in the fact that *XXY* finds its home in the international market in LGBT festivals, while it was distributed by companies that specialise in LGBT film, such as Peccadillo Pictures in the United Kingdom. In addition to being screened at well-known festivals such as Cannes, Edinburgh, and Toronto, it was also screened at the Lesbian and Gay festival in Paris (November 2007), the Lesbian and Gay festival in London (April 2008), and the LGBT film festival in San Francisco (June 2008).³⁰ In San Francisco, a World Center for gay culture, it won the audience award for best feature film. These spaces of consumption are comfortable ones for Puenzo who clearly intended the film to speak to queer communities beyond the single intersex issue. She notes:

The inter contained in the word intersex seems to suggest that we are between men and women, creating all type of analogies with transexuality (sic), homosexuality, heterosexuality, bisexuality, etc. [. . .] Some think intersex means not having a clear sexual orientation, and that the only discussion around this issue is to avoid the mutilation of their body (Levy).

Conclusions

This article has attempted to connect global queer cinema and European funding bodies through the examples of two of the best-known transnational Latin American films directed by women. Rather than seeing European funding for these cases as neo-colonial forms of cultural imperialism, I have sought to demonstrate how these programmes also create spaces for queer art films. These films along with a number of others are responding to social, political and cultural shifts in many countries of the world, redefinitions of the family unit, and an increase in social rights for gays, lesbians, and transgender people. As Farmer has argued: there have been ‘radical changes in sexual economies’ and ‘film, as an aesthetic medium rooted in visual spectacle and sensational appeal, is particularly well suited for the cultural negotiation of such changes’ (2011: 83). It is, he continues, ‘a medium that images, and in so doing helps audiences to imagine the transforming sexual economies of modernity as these are realized in diverse cultural contexts and through diverse aesthetic idioms (83-84).

Many of these changes have been taking place in Europe and Latin America, and countries in both continents (and, of course, others) are in the process of debating ‘correct’ ways to behave sexually, the rights and wrongs of gay marriage and childbirth, adoption of children by persons who are not within traditional family units, and rights for those who question established categories of male and female. Latin America, in this regard, is not the underdeveloped ‘other’ as some may assume. The Argentine born, New York based writer and filmmaker, Pablo Goldbarg, rather surprisingly reflects these assumptions in an interview with Lucía Puenzo when he asks Puenzo, “How can Alex survive in a macho Latin American society? I wonder if she should she move to Europe instead of Uruguay, or if she would have more fun with people that hide behind the “macho” icon?” Puenzo replies, correcting this misperception and speaks of social progress in Argentina. “Actually, when I started writing the film I was quite surprised with how open-minded Argentina is about these issues today, even more than in some European countries”. She goes on to speak to him about civil unions between gay couples, legal adoption of children, and rights for intersex people. Indeed a global map of countries and states where gay and lesbian marriage is allowed, a good barometer for advances in a range of LGBT issues, reveals that the Americas, and Europe are leading the way in this regard. (‘Gay Marriage Around the World’).³¹ In Latin America marriage is legal in Argentina, Uruguay, and some states in Mexico and Brazil.

Latin American directors do not, then, need funds from Europe because Europe is more liberal and enlightened, but because organizations, companies and programmes offer money that they need to start or complete their films. As in the case with

academic research councils, funding bodies, organizations, businesses and film funding programmes give priority to films dealing with topical issues such as these, and films with a queer sensibility fit within a European identity, at least according to official documents that speak to the way that the European Union sees itself. For instance, according to the webpage dedicated to gay rights for the European Commission's justice department 'The principle of equal treatment is a fundamental value for the EU, which is going to great lengths to combat homophobia and discrimination based on sexual orientation' ('Homophobia'). While the same page states that homophobia, 'is an unacceptable violation of human dignity and it is incompatible with the founding values of the EU' ('Homophobia').

Clearly, this interest in funding films with a queer sensibility is not limited to films directed by women or those made by Latin American directors, but every study needs a focus. And the focus here reveals recurrent sources of finance and a corpus of films which can be read as queer. To recap, these are: *La niña santa* that counts Hubert Bals and El Deseo among its producers; *XXY* funded by Cinéfondation, Wanda Visión, and Pyramide Film among others; *El niño pez* with Programa Ibermedia y Wanda Visión as co-producers; *Perfume de violetas: nadie te oye* by Marisa Sistach, a Mexican/Dutch co-production; the two films by Claudia Llosa *Madeinusa* and *La teta asustada*, funded by the German World Cinema Fund y Wanda Visión among others, and *El último verano de la boyita* by Julia Solomonoff with finance from the Programa Ibermedia and El Deseo. This focus on European funders should not however discount national support, and national bodies still play an important role in the production of these films; to give two examples, the Argentine State Organization, el Instituto Nacional de Cine y Artes Audiovisuales (INCAA) co-produced *El último verano de la boyita* and *El niño pez*. As seen, issues of changing sexual and gender identities are as relevant in Latin America as they are in Europe.

An analysis of the main characters of *La niña santa* and *XXY* illustrates the way that queer representations and textual strategies function to provide access to the global art cinema networks. This study has demonstrated the importance of the protagonists in locating Martel and Puenzo's films within these spaces. Amalia and Alex fascinate us; they are strong and fragile at the same time, they question social forms of regulation, and their sense of morality goes beyond good and evil. They also fit within a panorama of queer characters in their refusal to adopt essentialist, hetero-normative sexual identities. They are attractive, powerful, and dangerous adolescents who fill the screens; they disturb the peace of the patriarchal worlds they live in; and they refuse to be victims. Latin American women directors have arrived on the world stage and they have brought us new unforgettable protagonists.

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² Solomonoff speaks of the similarities and differences between her film and *La niña santa* and *XXY* in an interview with Martin and Shaw (2012)

³ For a useful list of Latin American women directors and their films, see the list created in Mubi (web site for films on demand), 'Latin American female Directors' by Apursansar

⁴ Bemberg's career was sadly curtailed by her death to cancer in 1995. For a study on the work of Bemberg, see King et al. (2000). For readings on the work of Novaro, see Rashkin, (2001) and Lindsay (2008).

⁵ Lita Stantic has produced films by Lucrecia Martel, Adrián Caetano, Diego Lerman, y the Paraguayan director Paz Encina, among other directors.

⁶ For details, see The Swamp, Company Credits
http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0240419/companycredits?ref_=tt_ft

⁷ Martel's participation in the Résidence is mentioned on the following website:
<http://www.festival-cannes.com/en/theResidence/sessions/3.html>

⁸ For more on Cinefondation, see <http://www.festival-cannes.com/en/cinefondation.html>

⁹ These are R & C Produzioni and Teodora film
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0300270/companycredits>

¹⁰ His best known films are *La historia oficial/The Official version* (1985) y *Old Gringo* (1989)

¹¹ Her latest film *Wakolda* (2013), based on her novel was supported by World Cinema Aid, that has replaced Fonds Sud. 'First Features Financed from France's World Cinema Aid Fund'. It is an Argentine, Spanish, French, German, Norwegian

co-production, and, at the time of writing (May 2013) has been selected in the Cannes Un Certain Regard category.

¹² I am grateful to Ben Garner for the notion of mutual interest replacing neo-colonial patterns in the context of European cultural funding policy.

¹³ “Cuando empecé a escribir la historia la situé ahí por lo evocativo de la sensualidad y el misterio. En un momento pensé que tenía que hacerla en un hotel más falso [. . .], pero en Salta no había un hotel así. Y yo tenía una desesperación completamente irracional y absurda por filmar en Salta. Entonces fui al Termas a ver si podía ser. Estuve dos días, sola como un perro, y supe que tenía que ser el lugar” For more analysis on the importance of Salta and *La niña santa* as an autobiographical film, see Arboleda-Rios, 2011.

¹⁴ For an interesting discussion of allegory in the films of Martel, see Page (2009: 183-191).

¹⁵ I have chosen to use the feminine form from this moment to refer to Alex due to deficiencies in the language to refer to intersex people, although I am aware that Alex complicates any singular use of a male or female pronoun, and indeed, draws attention to these linguistic deficiencies.

¹⁶ Alison Butler (2002) provides a good summary and analysis of feminist film theory.

¹⁷ “No es un monstruo. . . apoyar sexualmente no es para tanto, no es una violación; es algo tan cercano a una experiencia sexual infantil que era vital intentar que eso no se perdiera en el personaje. Jano es una especie de niño agigantado que no puede manejar todo” (Enríquez 2004).

¹⁸ Paul Julian Smith (2012: 11) notes that in a survey by Cinema Tropical directed at critics, academics and film professionals in New York to name the ten best Latin American films of the decade (2000-2009), three works of Martel featured in the top ten, and *La ciénaga* came top. The results can be found at the website, <http://www.cinematropical.com/Sections/10-best-films.html>

¹⁹ I would like to thank Tim Bergfelder, Rob Stone and Belén Vidal for suggesting some of these examples.

²⁰ Her analysis focuses on *Tan de repente/Suddenly* (Lerman, 2002) as an example of global queer cinema.

²¹ Smith notes the way critics highlight global precedents, or choose to find allegorical meanings in the narratives (26)

²² For two excellent readings of the uncanny queer in *La niña santa*, see Martin (2011), and Grant (2012).

²³ ‘la ambigüedad genital nada tiene que ver con los genes XXY, que se corresponden a lo que clínicamente se denomina Síndrome de Klinefelter’ (García 2007)

²⁴ I am grateful to Hoang Tan Nguyen for sending me a copy of this article

²⁵ Catherine Grant (2012) applies this idea to Martel’s films, arguing that ‘vernacular queerness’ cannot be applied to Martel’s *La mujer sin cabeza*, a film that, on the contrary, ‘queers the queer’ for its use of the uncanny, and its refusal to signify.

²⁶ Gleghorn does nonetheless argue that the film raises the spectre of the social monster in order to attack prejudice; it “recycles the motif of the monster in order to make social comment on the abuses committed against these invisible bodies” (168-9)

²⁷ It is interesting that the English subtitles exaggerate the shocking nature of this scene, by translating “acostar” (to sleep with or literally to lay with) with “fuck” - “I’ve never fucked anyone, would you like to?”, a fact that corresponds with its position within a new queer cinematic canon.

²⁸ It was produced by Lita Stantic, producer of Martel’s films

²⁹ For an insightful queer reading of *Tan de repente*, see Galt 2013.

³⁰ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0995829/releaseinfo>.

³¹ At the time of writing (May 2013), the only countries outside of Europe and the Americas where gay marriage is legal are New Zealand and South Africa.